Study on the Features of English Political Euphemism and its Social Functions

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Abstract

Political euphemism is a tool for political leaders to control information transmission. Based on some examples, this paper begins with a summary of three features which distinguish political euphemism from others. Then, it discusses its two social functions based on Austin's Speech Act Theory: 1. as political leaders' tool, political euphemism plays the role of hiding the truth and legalizing wrong behaviors; 2. it influences people's sense of right and wrong as well as their understanding of the objective world, hence succeeding in persuading them. Such a linguistic phenomenon provides another proof that language is not only a reflection of the objective world but a process of social construction.

Keywords: Political euphemism, Social Functions, Feature, Speech act

1. Introduction

Euphemism, a common phenomenon in human language use, has attracted much attention home and abroad. With the arrival of foreign linguistic theories in China since 1980s, Chinese scholars have published a large number of essays and books which focus on euphemism from different perspectives and systematically summarize the causes of its production, way of composition, classification, and pragmatic principles of composition as well as its social functions. (Shu, 1995, p17; Liu, 2000, p36) Actually, political euphemism has always been a point of penetration for foreign political linguists to evaluate and criticize political discourse. In the recent years, with the establishment of the selected English newspaper reading course in many Chinese colleges, English political euphemism began to attract people's attention. However, it is mainly confined to its disguising function (Pan, 2004, p85), leaving its influences on people's thoughts and ideology untouched. This paper begins with an analysis on the features of political euphemism and explores its two main social functions—disguising or cheating function and persuasive function with Austin's Speech Act Theory. Overall, this paper aims at further revealing the essential features of political euphemism, expanding people's vision in euphemism and revealing the relationship among language, thought and existence to some extent.

2. Features of Political Euphemism

Euphemism is defined in different ways from the perspectives of pragmatics and style: Hongrui Wen (2002) once quoted several representative definitions, which have it in common that euphemism is a replacement of ordinary expressions with propitious or exaggerated ones. Political euphemism is created in political life and serves political purposes. Generally speaking, it is a tool for political participants to hide scandals, disguise the truth, guide public thoughts when discussing social issues or events. In spite of some common features political euphemism shares with others, it has three typical features.

2.1 Greater Degree of Deviation from its Signified

According to Swiss linguist Saussure, language signs are a combination of the signifier, the phonetic forms of language and the signified, objects in existence represented by linguistic forms. Due to the lack of direct or logical relations between the two, they have a discretionary relationship with each other, making it possible to create euphemism by replacing the signifier. Because euphemism is just created by transforming the signifier to enlarge the association distance between the signifier and the signified, euphemism meanings stay relative to their former zero-degree ones (Xu, 2002, p7). Although euphemism and its former zero-degree signifier refer to the same signified, political euphemism is different from those commonly used euphemistic forms in order to avoid death and other physical phenomena in that it deviates greatly from the meaning expressed by its former signifier, or even a complete distortion. For example, Former US President Reagan once named the 10-warhead intermediate-range missile as "peacekeeper"; some later political

participants named their attack as "active defense"; they even replaced "recession" with "negative growth" because it sounded offensive to the ear. It is quite obvious that these expressions are not a simple replacement of the former zero-degree signifier, but quite opposite meanings to their literal meanings, just like replacing "black" with "white". We might as well mark euphemism's deviation degree with a range from 1 to 10, within which a greater number refers to a greater degree of deviation. In this case, the above mentioned political euphemism expressions should be marked with 10 while some ordinary expressions such as "overweight" and "fat" can only be marked as 1.

2.2 More Vague Meanings

George Owell pointed out two characteristics of political discourse in *Politics and the English Language* (1946), that is, the obsolescence and vagueness of figure of speech. Euphemism, characterized by replacing direct expressions with implicative, obscure and vague ones, plays a quite essential role in demystifying the connotation of political discourse when serving political purposes. Some commonly employed demystifying methods in political euphemism include replacing specific meanings with general ones, replacing hyponyms with superordinates and replacing derogatory meanings with neutral or even commendatory ones. For instance, people often refer to the atomic bombs used in Hiroshima as "the gadget", "the device", "the thing" or other vague meanings. When talking about American army's invasion into Grenada in 1983, President Reagan was quite dissatisfied with the word "invasion" used by the journalists, instead, he expressed it as "a rescue mission", glorifying their military invasion as their help offer to other countries. Similarly, US air attacks in Vietnam and Libya were called "air operation; President Bush also glorifying their military attack to Iraq with some neutral and general expressions such as "military operation" or "disarm" in this speech delivered on the very day they made war against Iraq in 2003.

2.3 Strong Characteristic of Times

Euphemism is the language reflection of Social culture, (Peng, 1999. p66) therefore changes in social development will propel those in language. In each international vicissitude, political euphemism will be booming. Due to US's important role in international politics as well as its dynamic domestic politics and economy, rich soil is provided for the creation of political euphemism. For example, from US economic decline are "recession", "disinflation" and "negative growth" created, hence giving birth to some euphemistic expressions such as "downsize" or "workforce adjustment". After Watergate Scandal, quite a few euphemistic expressions were produced to hide such political scandal. In addition, military actions are also an extension from politics. It is said that war has brought about not only death and destruction but new euphemistic expressions because they will make death sound less horrible (Page, 2003). US Department of Defense named their air attack in Vietnam as "air support" and "protective action", their destruction over Vietnamese villages as "pacification program" and those homeless refugees as "ambient non-combat personnel. Similarly, deaths and injuries caused by their bombardment over other nations were expressed as "collateral damage". It is no wonder that English Teachers' Council of US once awarded the Best Political Euphemism Award to its Department of Defense.

Besides, its characteristic of times can also be reflected in the variation in the signifier of the same objective phenomenon with time. Let's take the different euphemisms of military attack in different periods as an example. In 1950s, Truman described Korean War as "police action"; in 1960s and 1970s, Vietnam War was called "Vietnam Conflict" by US; in 1983, US invasion into Grenada was said to be "a rescue mission" instead of "incursion"; its invasion into Panama was also called "Operation Just Cause" and Bush Government said Iraqi War beginning in March, 2003 as "Operation Iraqi Freedom".

Inside the language system, such constant changes with time evolve from the relationship between the signifier and signified mentioned in 2.1. Although there is no relation between linguistic signs and their signified, people tend to relate euphemism to its signified after it has been used for a period. As a result, the former vagueness and sense of distance disappear and euphemistic color fades away. Consequently, politicians will rack their brains to find alternative expressions. However, the production of a large number of political euphemisms can find its root in profound social reasons, which will be analyzed in two aspects as follows:

3. Social Functions of Political Euphemism

3.1 Speech Act Theory and Social Functions of Political Euphemism

It is shown in the above analysis that political euphemism is different from others expressing physical phenomena or used in other fields such as in career because it is equipped with obvious political language characteristics. Actually, political language is neither romantic as literature nor precise as that in foreign trade, but purpose-oriented (Tian, 2002. p24). In the following part, let's look at how political euphemism performs illocutionary act and perlocutionary act with Austin's Speech Act Theory. Austin claims that speech performs three speech acts simultaneously, including locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act (He, 1997, pp85-86). This theory provides theoretical support for us to reveal the social functions of political euphemism. However, with individual listeners as his subject, Austin mainly focused his attention on the function of speech act verbs in the three levels of speech act. Here in this paper, we try to analyze this linguistic phenomenon from a wider perspective with political leaders (including governmental officials

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serving them) and public people as the two sides of the communication. We find that implication is an important part of euphemism in addition to its narrative and signified functions.

3.2 Illocutionary Act--- Political Euphemism's Disguising and Deceptive Function

Political euphemism is an effective tool for political leaders to control the quantity and quality of information transmission, with which some disgraceful behaviors or motivations will be glorified or hidden, hence avoiding public accusal. For example, US Ex-President Nixon and his partners called their overhearing spying in Watergate Scandal as "intelligence gathering" and their lie telling as "less than truthful" and "prevaricate". Obviously, such trivialized expression is to smooth out the bad influences they have exerted. US Government once expressed their nuclear experiment in South Pacific as "operation sunshine". It is widely known that atomic bomb experiments are mainly intended to test the extensiveness and effectiveness of its execution, but such a euphemistic name hides their nature. It is impossible for people who are uninformed of it to associate such a beautiful name with terrible nuclear weapon. In the reports about US military attacks to other nations in recent years, people hardly find expressions as "surprise attack". Instead, some other expressions such as "preemptive strikes" or "surgical strikes" are employed to add a color of justice. Actually, all these are defensive expressions to hide their illegal attack to others.

It doesn't go far to compare politicians to euphemism masters because they skillfully deliver their lies with their own language. 2500 years ago, Chinese militarist Sunzi summarized military behaviors as "nothing is too deceitful in war", which seems also adaptable to politicians. George Orwell (1946) pointed out straightforwardly that political language was designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable.

3.3 Perlocutionary Act---Political Euphemism's Persuasive Function

Lakoff (1990) claims that politics is language and language is politics. Political euphemism is similar to political propaganda in that both aim at persuading and influencing the public. It has been a long time since linguists realized language is not only for ideogram or reflecting social culture but for participating social events and constructing social relationship. Actually, it is a kind of social practice and an intervention. Based on the above facts, Berger and Luckmann (1967) have long before pointed out the important role of language in the construction of social reality. Although it doesn't change the signified things in existence, it really changes its conceptual connotation because sometimes people's learning of a concept or a meaning is based on their knowledge about words (Hudson, 2000, pp92-93). Political leaders try to shape people's recognition and knowledge of the world with the use of euphemism, hence influencing their view of world and intervening their knowledge of the world and sense of right and wrong.

It is stated by critical linguists that language is not a true reflection of reality. While helping people to know about the objective world, language also imposes on them a set of extremely subjective classification on behalf of their group interests, which is often used to deceive people without detection (Dong, 2000, p25). The influences exerted by political euphemism are not immediate but subtle and potential, hence planting illusive concepts into people's minds and changing them into facts accepted by these people.

4. Conclusion

Political euphemism is not just a simple rhetoric replacement of the former zero-degree signifier. Instead, it has some special characteristics which distinguish it with euphemistic expressions in other fields. Its production reflects political leaders' motivation to hide the truth and shift public attention off it. By using such expression, they attempt to control people's learning about the world as well as information transmission. Therefore, when reading political discourse, we should be alert to some potential political purposes hidden in euphemism. Especially in some courses such as selected English newspaper reading, some analyses on political euphemism should be made to enhance students' capacity in understanding newspapers, improve their appreciation ability of English and learn about the way that language serve political purposes.

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